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**COMMERCE DEPARTMENT IMPLEMENTS REGULATIONS TO REDUCE DOLPHIN
MORTALITY IN THE EASTERN TROPICAL PACIFIC OCEAN**

U.S. Commerce Secretary William M. Daley today announced that the United States will implement new regulations that meet internationally adopted standards for protecting dolphins in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean and assure the public that tuna labeled dolphin-safe had no dolphins seriously injured or killed during tuna fishing operations.

“With these regulations, dolphin deaths should continue to go down,” said Secretary Daley. “In an atmosphere of intensely competing interests, we have developed an international agreement that benefits the entire ecosystem.”

Under the regulations, tuna products will be allowed to be imported into the United States if they are harvested in compliance with the International Dolphin Conservation Program Act. The regulations will also implement a new labeling standard that allows tuna products to carry a dolphin-safe label only if no dolphins were killed or seriously injured during a set in which tuna were caught. Previously, only tuna caught when no dolphins were encircled qualified for the dolphin-safe tuna label on products imported into the United States. In August 1997, Congress passed the International Dolphin Conservation Program Act. A number of environmental organizations, including the Center for Marine Conservation and the World Wildlife Fund, supported passage of the legislation.

Countries, including the United States, that voluntarily participated in the International Dolphin Conservation Program have entered into a binding, international agreement limiting dolphin mortalities associated with tuna fishing to less than 5,000 dolphins per year, with additional restrictions to ensure that no individual stock is adversely impacted.

Today’s announcement follows an initial proposed rule in June of this year, followed by two public hearings and extensive review of over 2,000 public comments received.

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“Through voluntary international action, the number of dolphin deaths has dropped dramatically from more than 133,000 in 1986 to less than 2,000 in 1998,” said Penny Dalton, director of the Commerce Department’s National Marine Fisheries Service. “The new regulations will keep those deaths to a minimum while improving the management of the ecosystem in the eastern tropical Pacific. We believe that continued low level of dolphin mortalities will allow depleted stocks to recover to healthy population abundance levels.”

The new regulations establish general requirements to track and verify of the status of tuna imports from the eastern tropical Pacific (ETP). The new tuna tracking program will track both dolphin-safe tuna and non-dolphin-safe tuna throughout the tuna harvest and processing. In addition, U.S. fishing vessels would be allowed to operate on the same basis as other signatory nations under a streamlined permitting process for purse seine fishing in the ETP.

Yellowfin tuna in the ETP aggregate beneath schools of certain dolphin stocks. Fishing vessels encircle schools of dolphins with a purse seine net to capture the tuna that may be concentrated below. Hundreds of thousands of dolphins died in the early years of this fishing method before fishermen began to employ techniques to reduce dolphin mortality.

As part of the International Dolphin Conservation Program Act, the National Marine Fisheries Service was required to research the effects of repeated chase and encirclement of dolphins in the ETP and provide data for an initial finding by the Secretary on whether encircling dolphins to catch tuna causes a significant adverse impact on three depleted dolphin stocks found in the ETP. Because the research study did not adequately demonstrate that the depleted dolphin stocks were adversely affected by this fishing practice, the International Dolphin Conservation Program Act required the Secretary to make the labeling standard change.

The Fisheries Service said it will solicit comments for 90 days on the interim final rule. Written comments on the regulations should be submitted by April 3 and be addressed to: J. Allison Routt, NMFS, SW Region, Protected Resources Division, 501 W. Ocean Blvd., Suite 4200, Long Beach, CA 90802-4213.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: For more information on the interim final rule, including background, fact sheets, and Q&A's, please visit our Web site at:
http://www.nmfs.gov/prot_res/main/tunadolpin.html